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Asian Groups See Bias in Plan to Diversify New York's Elite Schools

By **Elizabeth A. Harris** and **Winnie Hu**

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A new plan to change the way students are admitted to New York's elite public high schools is infuriating members of some Asian communities who feel they will be pushed aside in the drive to admit more than a handful of black and Latino students.

But in a series of forceful statements on Tuesday, Richard A. Carranza, the schools chancellor, offered a blunt rebuttal to their claims. "I just don't buy into the narrative that any one ethnic group owns admission to these schools," he said on Fox 5 New York.

The battle revealed the charged emotions around who gets access to highly sought-after seats at the prestigious institutions, which include Stuyvesant High School and Brooklyn Technical High School.

"The test is the most unbiased way to get into a school," said Peter Koo, a city councilman whose district includes Flushing, Queens, on Tuesday. "It doesn't require an interview. It doesn't require a résumé. It doesn't even require connections. The mayor's son just graduated from Brooklyn Tech and got into Yale. Now he wants to stop this and build a barrier to Asian-Americans — especially our children."

The schools, which admit students based on a single test, look starkly different from the school system overall. While black and Hispanic students represent nearly 70 percent of public school students, they make up just 10 percent of students at the specialized high schools, a vast underrepresentation that has long been considered an injustice and a symbol of the city's extreme school segregation.

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Asian students, on the other hand, are overrepresented at the schools. While just 16 percent of public school students are Asian, they make up 62 percent of students at the specialized schools. White students also make up a disproportionate share of the students, though by a much smaller margin. They are 15 percent of the system overall and 24 percent of students at specialized schools.

Mayor Bill de Blasio offered a two-pronged plan on Saturday to address this, first by setting aside 20 percent of the seats at each of the specialized schools for students from high-poverty schools — which tend to have a high share of black and Hispanic students — who score just below the cutoff score.

But his administration's ultimate goal, he said, is to eliminate the test entirely. In its place, top students would be chosen from every middle school in the city, a determination that would take into account their class rank and scores on statewide standardized tests. This move would require state action, because a state law dictates how specialized schools admit their students. The original law names just three schools, but the city has since created five more.

At a news conference on Monday, more than 100 people gathered in a second-floor dining room at the Golden Imperial Palace in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, to declare that the proposal was an attack on Asian-Americans.

"I'm not sure if the mayor is racist, but this policy is certainly discriminatory," said Kenneth Chiu, chairman of the New York City Asian-American Democratic Club. "It's like the Chinese Exclusion Act, is what I think," he continued, comparing the plan to a 19th-century immigration law that effectively prohibited Chinese immigration. "Our mayor is pitting minority against minority, which is really, really messed up, to put it nicely."



On Tuesday, Richard Carranza, the New York City schools chancellor, went on television and radio to push the mayor's plan. Kevin Hagen for The New York Times

On Tuesday, a rally was held outside the gates of City Hall, where protesters held signs that said “End Racism” and “I Have a Dream.”

Soo Kim, president of the Stuyvesant Alumni Association, said that while the schools are often described as elite, the children who attend them exist worlds away from the lives of the 1 percent. Many of the students — and indeed, many of the Asian students — who attend specialized schools are poor. Many of them go to years of test prep in order to earn scores good enough to gain admission.

“I have dozens of emails from my members who say, ‘My dad was a taxi driver,’ or, ‘We ran a green grocer,’” Mr. Kim said. “Stuyvesant is an option for those who have no option. They don’t know how to interview or influence their way into the right public schools or the right private schools.”

Mr. Carranza went out on Tuesday to push the new plan. “The data is very clear,” Mr. Carranza said on television. “We are systematically excluding students in the most diverse city in the world from opportunities, in this particular case in specialized schools.”

He offered a stark figure: Of 900 incoming freshman admitted to Stuyvesant, only 10 are African-American. He also said that while there are more than 600 middle schools in New York City, half of specialized students come from just 21 middle schools. He said that looking at a student’s academic record was a “much more holistic way of looking at student ‘talent’” than a single test.

“As the mayor has very, very eloquently stated, we’re not trying to penalize anybody,” Mr. Carranza said on WNYC. “This should be good news for our poor, our immigrant communities, that you’re not going to have to spend thousands of dollars on test prep for one test to get an opportunity to go to a specialized school.”

Mr. Carranza emphasized that relying on one test was out of step with admissions to other elite institutions. “If you’re applying to Harvard today, you would not be admitted based on a test score,” Mr. Carranza said. “It’s multiple measures.” (He might have chosen a different school to cite as an example: Harvard University is being sued by a group that says the school discriminates against Asian-American applicants.)

The mayor’s plan does have a basis in research. A study by Sean P. Corcoran, an associate professor of economics and education policy at New York University’s Steinhardt School, examined six strategies to diversify the specialized schools and found that taking students from every middle school was the only one that had a large effect on demographics. It also found that plan would lower the academic performance of admitted students, a key argument of those in favor of retaining the test. But a similar study, by Lazar Treschan at the Community Service Society, which included a minimum academic standard applicants must achieve, found no such diminution.

The city's proposal also includes an academic minimum. Students must be among the top 25 percent of performers citywide. An education department spokesman said the city's projection found that students admitted under its proposed model would have the same grades as current specialized students, and that their state test scores would be virtually unchanged.

The specialized schools carry enormous symbolic weight in the city, and a seat in one of them is seen as a glittering prize. They are among the most distinguished schools in the city, some on par with elite and expensive private schools, and they offer a real pathway out of the working class for many families.

Nonetheless, their impact is actually quite narrow. Of the more than 300,000 high school students citywide, just 16,000 attend these schools. And there are many other schools that screen students academically, like Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Manhattan, where just 16 percent of students are black or Hispanic. Sixty-four percent of the students there are white, and just 21 percent of its students are poor.

Changing admissions at schools like Eleanor Roosevelt would make more sense, argued some opponents of the plan. "Why go to Albany on three schools," said Mr. Kim, "when you can fix those schools right now."

Jeffrey E. Singer contributed reporting.

Follow Elizabeth A. Harris and Winnie Hu on Twitter: @Liz_A_Harris and @WinnHu

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A **Andre**
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Times Pick

As an "Afro Caribbean American" I don't think it's just biased but also stupid. Dumbing down standards isn't going to help minorities compete when they reach adulthood. "Black" Caribbean and African students tend to do well among minorities because parents are very exacting. I went to school with low income Asians here in NY. Their parents take education VERY seriously. That's why they can compete. This is a terrible move.

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